

(Washington, DC)—Milwaukee's Zablocki VA Medical Center, a major veterans facility in Wisconsin's Fourth Congressional District, has been placed on a priority list to receive \$32.5 million for a new Spinal Cord Injury Unit (SCI) in the 2007 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) budget. Congresswoman Gwen Moore sent a letter signed by Wisconsin delegation members Sen. Herb Kohl, Sen. Russ Feingold, Rep. Tammy Baldwin, Rep. Mark Green, and Rep. Ron Kind to VA Secretary R. James Nicholson in January expressing their strong support for the funding. The letter outlined the current operational capabilities of the medical center, as well as the dire need for upgrades and enhanced capacity.

"Our veterans have risked their lives to defend our country, and deserve the highest quality of care. Spinal cord injuries present our veterans with challenges unique to their service and require the best of rehabilitation services," said the letter. "By any standard, the current facilities at Zablocki are outdated. Funding for a new SCI unit is especially of concern at this time as veterans are returning to Wisconsin from Iraq."

Zablocki Medical Center is the only VA unit that treats spinal cord injuries in Wisconsin, and only one of 23 in the United States, treating approximately 500 veterans as inpatients and providing service to 10,000 outpatients yearly. The \$32.5 million in funding will improve patient care, maximize patient services and quality of life as it creates a new building that will include 38 patient beds. The new SCI unit will help thousands of veterans deal with irreversible paraplegia and quadriplegia, disabilities that are catastrophic to both veterans and their families.

The existing Spinal Cord Injury Unit at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center was established in 1972. The SCI unit is on two retrofitted acute care wards on the 10th floor of the Medical Center. Limitations of space and technology in the current location have made it impossible to keep the SCI unit abreast of the evolution of SCI medicine over the past thirty-three years. These facilities do not currently meet the current standards as set by JCAHO, the VA's space criteria, or the life and safety evacuation criteria. As of now, the SCI unit does not have rooms that were built to contain all the equipment needed by the veteran as he/she works to achieve optimal independence, and the unit's multi-patient rooms make it virtually impossible to meet expectations for patient privacy.

Even with the limited space and outdated technology, the SCI unit at Zablocki VA Medical Center boasts a very dedicated staff. The structural upgrades and new equipment afforded by this funding will bring Zablocki up to speed with the spatial and technology requirements that are needed to ensure that the staff can serve our veterans properly and more efficiently.

The \$32.5 million in funding requested by Congresswoman Moore and others in the Wisconsin delegation was included in the 2007 proposed budget just released by the VA. Construction would begin after Congress appropriates the money later this year.

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